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Book Report

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The Lost Civilization: The Story of the Classic Maya, written by T. Patrick Culbert, focuses on Maya who lived 1000 and more years in southern half of Yucatan peninsula. This area became known as Peten. The only major feature in this area is the Maya mountains, a source of volcanic stone that was greatly prized. The book breaks up the Classic Mayan existence into two parts; The Early Classic (250-600AD) and the Late Classic (600-900AD). Preclassic Mayas were very religious people who built temples as place of worship. Not that much is known of the real early Mayan structures because they rebuilt on top of existing structures making it harder to pin point a date. Hieroglyphics marked the start of the Classic period of the Maya. In the heart of Mayan lowlands the earliest hieroglyph was found, which is where anthropologists believed the Classic Maya lived, dated July 6, 292 AD. Soon after that, other cities around the area began putting up dated monuments. Stelae were religious symbols, put in front of temples and represented the Mayan culture. Lowland Maya agriculture took the system of slash and burn, cutting down forests, burning them and using it for 2-3 years then moving on and allow natural vegetation to regrow back in that area. It is often rare to support dense populations with this type of farming, leading some to believe they lived spread out among different areas. Trading for luxury goods were only for the elite Mayans who mostly lived in the large cities. The basic social unit of Maya was the extended family and they were known to live together in one area in the neighborhood of these cities. The great lords, who were the most known Mayans, ruled each major Maya site. Their images were carved into paintings that displayed them involved in wars, religious and diplomatic activities. The Mayans were an advanced society that had come up with a system of calendars, very similar to those we use today, as well as many accurate astronomical observations. The Late Classic Maya were inevitably doomed by their later generations. The increase in population forced them to live on river sites. It took less than a century between the peaks of calendars across the civilization to the final one. The rapid decline of the Maya suggests that there was either a revolt among the society, climate change or over population, maybe all three.

My reflection to this book is a curious one. Although the Maya became highly advanced and supported a large civilization that had existed for centuries, they were headed towards disaster from the start. By being an agriculture-based culture, they were forced to alter the environment around them. Once the land became over-used, there was no stopping the decline because they had become so dependent on crops for food and sale. Every civilization that experiences rapid population growth and relies heavily on the environment to survive, will not survive the long haul. We, as a world united, need to learn from the past and change the way we are living for the sake of humanity!